



Untitled
(cat. 40, detail)

¹ Author unknown, "Mouazzaz Rawdah at Gallery Vendome," *The Daily Star*, 17 March 1975, 9. From the archive of Galerie Janine Rubeiz, Beirut, Lebanon.

² For more information on *The International Art Exhibition for Palestine*, cf. Kristine Khouri and Rasha Salti (eds.), *Past Disquiet: Artists, International Solidarity and Museums in Exile*, Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2019.

Few modern artists in the Arab world have enjoyed a career as wide-ranging and illustrious as that of Mona Saudi (1945–2022), who worked in various mediums, from print and poster-making to sculpture and installation. The artist abandoned oil painting in the early 1960s when, to borrow from sculptor Muazzez Rawdah (1906–1986), she “discovered the stone.”¹ Saudi was notably amongst only a few female Arab contemporary artists ever to receive a public commission; *Géométrie de l'esprit* (1987) still stands outside of l'Institut du monde arabe in Paris. Over the course of her career, she straddled numerous roles, including mother, grandmother, and activist. She also travelled, worked, and published with her daughter, artist Dia Batal, and their friendship remains one of the most enduring relationships amongst the artistic milieu of the contemporary Arab world.

Many Arabs will remember Saudi as a champion of the Palestinian cause. As early as the 1960s, whilst based in Beirut, she joined the Plastic Arts Section of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), designing political posters whose messages of freedom and liberation resonate to this day. The artist also worked with leading intellectuals; for instance, she produced silk-screen prints based on the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008). In 1978, she undertook the most ambitious project of her career when she became director of the Plastic Arts Section within the PLO's Unified Information Office. In this role, Saudi mounted *The International Art Exhibition for Palestine*,² which opened at Beirut Arab University on 21 March of that year. The presentation brought together creative talent from across the Arab world, including Morocco's Mohammed Melehi and Iraq's Dia al-Azzawi, as well as around the globe. Hailing from nearly thirty countries, these artists had left-leaning values, and they donated some two hundred works. Committed to the anti-imperialist struggle, they had come together largely thanks to their belief in Saudi herself. Unfortunately, the Unified Information Office building, which housed works that had been donated for the exhibition, came under heavy shelling during the 1982 Lebanon War. Many of the works were lost, whilst others that had been loaned to Norway, Japan, and Iran were unable to return home.

I recall an incident during Saudi's visit to the Barjeel Art Foundation wing at Sharjah Art Museum in 2018. There, the artist had a chance encounter with a visiting former senior Iranian official from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. He had been instrumental to the Barjeel Art Foundation when it hosted the 2016 exhibition *The Sea Suspended* at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. Despite thirty-six years having passed since the works had been loaned to Tehran, Saudi spoke to him forcefully about the importance of returning them.

Whether through the lens of politics and art, poetry and language, or intellectuals and activists, an examination of Mona Saudi and her work offers a glimpse into the career of a nearly unrivalled and ever-enduring giant of our time.

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